

The Stylistic Functions of Discourse Markers in EFL Doctoral Students' Academic Research Papers

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Abstract:

Discourse markers (DM) refer to the linking words that insure the flow of discourse. An examination of students' essays discloses an alarming inability to use DM. Redundant and skimpy use of DA in students' essays seems to frustrate ideas and structures: Coherence and cohesion become, *de facto*, the first casualties. This mismanagement use originates from [1] pedagogical, [2] intercultural, and [3] methodological deficiencies that have accumulated over the years. The present study aims at investigating the functions of DM in doctoral students' written productions. 15 EFL doctoral students were selected. The findings reveal that DMs are either overused or underused.

Key Words: Discourse marker, essays, doctoral students.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Discourse markers define text coherence and cohesion, without which the text would come out stiff and hard to follow. The omnipresence of discourse markers, on the other hand, would make the text appear sloppy and redundant. The main function of DM is to lead to a smooth flow of ideas and structures, which eventually helps potential readers react to the text. These linguistic strategies refer to as discourse markers. DMs are tools to signal how students organize, craft, develop and evaluate ideas and views.

The present study is conducted to achieve the following goals: [1] define discourse markers, [2] point out at their classes, [3] investigate how EFL doctoral students employ them in their essays and research papers in their desperate search to maintain unity and finally [4] suggest some "tips" to improve EFL doctoral students' academic research papers.

2. Nature of Discourse and Discourse Analysis

2.1 Discourse

2.1.1. Conceptual Definition

Originally, the term “*discourse*” is derived from the Latin word “*discursus*” which means “conversation” (McArthur, 1992, p. 316). The term has been opted for a number of different significations and for a variety of purposes. According to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, the term discourse refers to “a serious speech or a piece of writing on particular subject”. (2001, p. 388). In this case, discourse is used to refer to both forms of written or spoken. Discourse is viewed as “anything beyond the sentence” (Schiffrin et al. 2001, p. 1). In this definition, the term discourse is being described as a vast concept rather than other units that comprise the language. Another definition suggested that the study of a discourse is the study of language (Fasold, 1990, p. 65 cited in Schiffrin et al. 2007, p.1). The term *discourse* is a form of language that is used in a typical

situation such as religious discourse, educational discourse or even a social discourse.

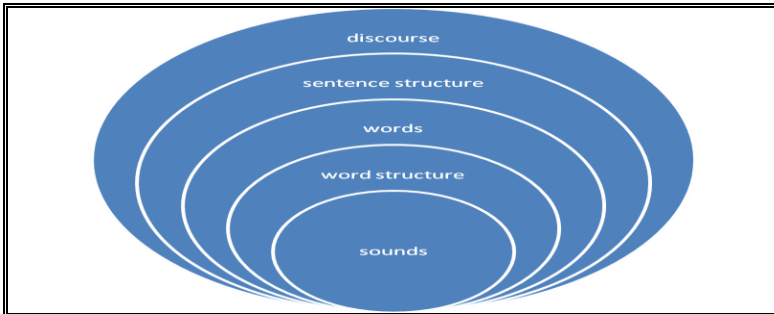


Figure1. Levels of Discourse

2.2 The Nature of discourse

Schiffrin (1994) distinguishes between the formal and functional approaches. In the formal approach, the study of discourse refers to as a unit of language beyond the sentence, whereas, in the functional level it is defined as language in use.

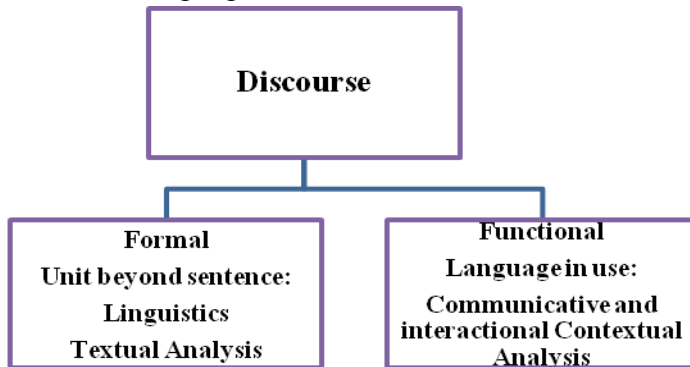


Figure.2. Approaches of Discourse drawn upon Alba-Juez (2009, p. 9)

The term “Discourse analysis” was first introduced by Zellig Harris (1952) as the study and analysis of the connected speech and writing. He viewed discourse as the next level in a hierarchical relationship that is constituted of morphemes, clauses and sentences. (Alba-Juez, 2009,p.13). Discourse analysis is interested in investigating knowledge about language beyond the sentence level. Paltridge states

“discourse analysis is an approach to the analysis of language that looks at the patterns of language across texts as well as the social and cultural contexts in which the text occurs”. (2012, p. 1). Paltridge, therefore, champions the sociolinguistic and pragmatic approach to the study of texts.

Discourse analysis has been viewed as an attempt to investigate the structure of language above the sentence, i.e., what the text really means and its intents. In this vein, Gee and Handford corroborate “Discourse analysis is also sometimes defined as the study of language above the level of a sentence, of the ways sentences combine to create meaning” (2013, p.1). Similarly, Cook states that “discourse analysis is used to examine how stretches of language considered in their full textual, social and psychological context” (1989, p. X). In brief, discourse analysis is a branch derived from applied linguistics. It probes patterns or units in communicative products and their correlations with the circumstances in which they take place, which are not explainable at the level of grammar (Carter, 1993, p. 23).

3. Probe on Discourse markers

3.1 Background and Definitions

There has been a plenitude of studies over the nature of discourse markers. DMs have various titles like discourse *particles* (Schourup, 1985, as cited in Müller, 2005.p 3). Another term devoted to refer to DMs as *pragmatic marker* (Watts, p. 1988; Redeker, np. 1990; Caron-Prague & Caron, np. 1991; Brinton, np. 1996; Andersen 1998; Brinton 1998; Erman, np. 2001: as cited in Müller, 2005.p 3). Some analysts view DMs as a category of discourse markers in the sense that they establish the relationships between two sentences (Fraiser,2009). Others make another distinction for those DMs have a wider function which encompasses other types of relations (Schiffrin, 1987, p. 2001; Romero Trillo, 2006, p. 2008 as cited in Alba-Juez, 2009, p. 308).

If discourse analysts seem to disagree on what a discourse marker fundamentally is, they agree, however, on how it affects the text.

Discourse markers are employed in an explicit way so they determine the interrelationship among the ideas of the written production.

3.2 Operational Definition of Discourse Markers

The basic tasks of discourse research is to identify the factors affecting the coherent or ‘flow’ of discourse which allows doctoral students and teachers to agree on a common understanding of their assumptions about what is being discussed. The figure below shows the different categorization of discourse markers.

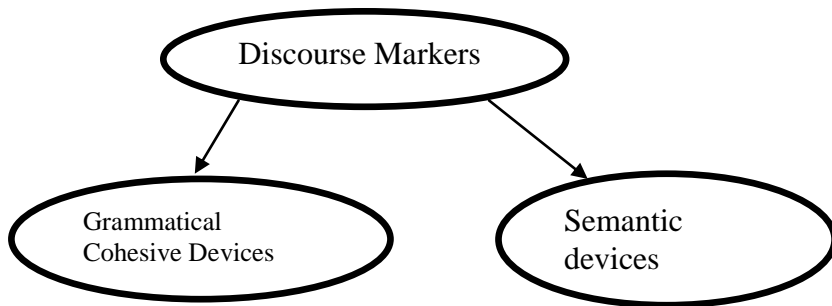


Figure.3. Categories of Discourse Markers

DMs are classified as grammatical cohesive device, i.e., they are lexicon expressions which derive from syntactic classes (Fraiser 1999). The first class refers to adverbs, for example, *therefore, well and why*, the second class are known as *prepositional phrases* (examples like *on the other hand, In particular, as a consequence*, and the third class is conjunctions such as *so, , etc* . Others claim that discourse markers are regarded as semantic devices in which they contribute to coherence of a given text. Cohesion can be achieved through the appropriate use of discourse markers. They have a crucial part in demonstrating cohesion and coherence in writing. Coherence, according to Halliday and Hassan (1976), is a means through which sentences are semantically- well formed.

3.3. Types of Discourse Markers

Fraiser (2009) claims that discourse markers are classified into three main sub-classes. The first class is known as *contrastive markers (CM)* in which the interpretation of S2 contrasts the meaning of S1. In other words, the two utterances are in opposition. The second class is

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known as *elaborative markers (EM)*. In other terms, the meaning of S2 and S1 shows a quasi-parallel relationship between S2 and S1. For instance, elaborative markers include: and, besides, moreover, etc. The third class is labelled as *inferential markers (IM)*. In this class, discourse markers signal that S2 argument and consummate S1.

Table. 1. Discourse Markers Taxonomy

No	Discourse markers	classification
01	Contrastive	But, Whereas, While, on the other hand, unlike, although, even though, though, despite the fact, however, nevertheless, despite, in spite of, instead of, in fact, still, in contrast

02	Elaborative markers	<p>And, above all, also, besides, better yet, for another thing, furthermore, in addition, moreover, more to the point, on top of it all, too, to cap it all off, what is more, I mean, in particular, namely, paranthetically, that is (to say), analogously, by the same token, correspondingly, equally, likewise, similarly, be that as it may, or, otherwise, that said, well, as well as, indeed, it seems like</p>
03	Inferential Markers	<p>So, so that, of course, accordingly, as a consequence, as a logical construction, as a result, because of this/that, consequently, for this/that reason, hence, it can be concluded that, therefore, in this/that case, under these/those condition, then ; all things considered</p> <p>After all, Because, Since</p>
04	Reason Markers	<p>To sum up, in conclusion, in sum, finally, lastly, at the end, in the ending, in summary</p>
05-	conclusive Markers	<p>For example, such as, for instance</p>
06	Exemplifiers Markers	

3.4. Features of Discourse Markers

Although discourse markers have been investigated widely in various theoretical frameworks, a little agreement among scholars and linguists has been reached concerning their nature and their

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characteristics (Brinton 1996; Beeching 2016). However, some basic features are recognized: They are used as indicators in identifying process. The following is a basic features of discourse markers (Jucker and Ziv 1998: 3; based on Brinton 1996: 33–35 as cited in Lutzky, 2012, p.12).

Table.2. Features of Discourse Markers drawn upon (Jucker and Ziv 1998: 3 cited in Lutzky, 2012, p.12).

Phonological and lexical features	<p>a. They are short and phonologically reduced.</p> <p>b. They form a separate tone group.</p> <p>c. They are marginal forms and hence difficult to place within a traditional word class.</p>
Syntactic features	<p>d. They are restricted to sentence-initial position.</p> <p>e. They occur outside the syntactic structure or they are only loosely attached to it.</p> <p>f. They are optional.</p>
Semantic feature	<p>g. They have little or no propositional meaning.</p>
Functional feature	<p>h. They are multifunctional, operating on several linguistic levels simultaneously.</p> <p>i. They are a feature of oral rather than written discourse</p>

Sociolinguistic and stylistic features	urse and are associated with informality. j. They appear with high frequency. k. They are stylistically stigmatised. l. They are gender specific and more typical of women’s speech.
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To summarize, the above mentioned are the most common features of discourse markers. It is suggested that typical discourse marker is syntactically and semantically free in the sense that it does not affect the truth condition linked to a given utterance, i.e., the meaning of an utterance.

3.5. Functions of Discourse Markers

Academics need to use the language toolkit, among which DM, to write forcefully and effectively. Actually, DMs are inevitable tools for scholars to fulfil distinct functions, convey messages, support claims, and interpret findings. They are used to link ideas in a given context. For this reason, discourse markers have been assigned various functions. In speaking, researchers agree that the use of DMs is to facilitate the hearers’ task of grasping what speakers’ utterances are. Aijmer (1996, p. 210) notes that “the function of discourse marker as a cues or guides the hearers’ interpretation in a given context”. Discourse markers prove to have the same function in written forms; they contribute to reach coherence in learners’ writing. Schiffrin describes the contribution of discourse markers to coherence by saying “Discourse markers provide contextual coordinates for utterances; they index an utterance to the local context in which utterances are produced and in which they are to be interpreted” (1987, p. 326).

Researchers (Coxhead & Byrd, 2007; Hyland, 2008; Li & Schmitt, 2009 cited in Karaata et al, 2012) argue that the main reason for using discourse markers in academic writing is to contribute to the effectiveness of what learners’ produce. Nattinger and Decarrio (1992

cited in Karaata et al, 2012) claim that discourse markers' function do not only refer to the connection between a part of a discourse and another, but also to configure subordinate and coordinate patters through aligning the dissemination at different standards. The use of these devices (DMs) improves the use of language in a flexible way and facilitates the ongoing text (Sciffrin et al. 2001). According to Brinton (1990, p. 74 cited in Muller, 2005, p. 9), DMs are used to:

- i. Initiate a discourse
- ii. Mark a boundary in a discourse (shift/ partial shift in a topic)
- iii. Preface a response or a reaction
- iv. Serve as a filler or delaying tactic
- v. Aid the speaker in a holding the floor
- vi. Bracket the discourse either cataphorically or anaphorically
- vii. Mark either foregrounded or backgrounded information.

In short, discourse markers are functional words used to carry out grammatical functions by linking ideas in a piece of writing so that can move from one sentence to the next smoothly and logically.

4. Doctoral Students' Writing Features

Doctoral students need to be aware of the academic writing demanding skills in order to engage effectively in research. They are expected to write expertly. Grami (2010, p. 9 as cited in Ali Al Badi, 2015, p. 66) asserts that "academic writing" in discipline-related research is rigorous and "requires a careful thought, discipline and concentration". Several efforts have been made to identify students' writing features. The most common features are: [1] Objectivity, [2] formality, and [3] precision. By *objectivity*, it is meant that learners are expected to be cerebral and present facts distancing themselves from sentimentality, personal bias, and wishful thinking. In other terms, when doctoral students are engaged in academic writing, they write objectively: They are concerned to provide bare facts and not affected by personal feelings and ungrounded biases. *Formality* is one of the features of writing. In order to write formally, a considerable effort is needed to construct meaningful sentences and paragraphs.

Students' writing should be factual, concise, precise, and accurate. The last feature is precision, The University of Melbourne, Australia advises its students in the following terms: By avoiding ambiguity, doctoral students are expected to communicate their ideas clearly, concisely, and precisely by providing specific information that has a direct relationship to the topic being discussed.

EFL Doctoral students' writing necessitates a thorough understanding of discourse markers, grammatical structures, and rhetorical devices, as well as the ability to manage them to write effectively. In this regard, Rivers (1968: 248) states

Writing practice may take a number of forms. Students will write out structure drills of various kinds: making substitutions of words and phrases, transforming sentences, expanding them to include further information within the limits of learned phrases, contracting them by substituting pronouns for nouns or simple words for groups of words.

EFL Doctoral students are required, therefore, to practice in order to enhance their use of discourse markers.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Research QQ

This study attempts to address the following specific research questions:

- 1- To what extent do EFL doctoral students effectively use discourse markers in their essays
- 2- If most EFL doctoral students tend to overload their essays with DM, what makes other EFL doctoral students underuse DM in their essays?

3. Although DMs are existent in both L1 and TL, they prove to be problematic for EFL doctoral students. It is legitimate to ask: Why is that?

5.2 Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that if EFL doctoral students make appropriate use of discourse markers, their essays would turn out to be forceful, convincing, and effective.

5.3 Population and Sample

Participants of this study are 15 EFL doctoral students from M. K. University of Biskra and K. M. University of Ouargla, who have been kindly requested to write an argumentative essay in which they express their *attitudes toward the assessment and feedback practices in the Algerian educational system*.

5.4. Data Collection and Data Analysis

The corpus used in this study comprises of 15 essays produced by EFL doctoral students who were requested to state their opinion and views about the current assessment and feedback in the Algerian educational system repetition. Then, data analysis is carried out manually through the identification and the description of the functions of discourse marker.

6. Discussion of Findings

The following is a list of the most common discourse markers presented in a form of a table.

6.1. List of Discourse markers found in the introduction section of the essays

The tables below briefly reveal that the most common types of DMs used to signal additive, elaborative or inferential relationships.

Table.3. Discourse markers found in the introduction section of the essays

and	each of which	and	but
despite	although	however	nevertheless
after	instead	without	because
as well as	as	also	in fact

however	since	as well as	not only this
that is to say	on the other hand	thus	such as
moreover	furthermore	thence	so

Examples (I)

S1: *And* within these two types branch out more different types

S2: The two most used *and* well known methods are formative and summative assessments

S3: *However*, after the independent, Algerian policy makers start implementing “the Arabization Policy”.

S4: *Although* the education sector went through remarkable developments

6.2. List of discourse markers opted in the body paragraphs

The following discourse markers were the most common used in order to negotiate meanings.

Table.4. discourse markers employed in the body paragraphs of the essays

however	so	also	because
in such	thus	furthermore	on the contrastive
for this reason	and	besides	further
first	as well as	in fact	since
particularly	as	hence	more importantly
by	at the end	or	after
in the other words	despite	moreover	as well as
in wide brief	therefore	to illustrate	for instance
however	specifically	in contrast	such as
for one thing	undeniably	in a nutshell	thus
on another note	nevertheless	accordingly	at the same time
however	similarly	additionally	furthermore
hence	that is to say	on the other hand	interestingly
thus	in addition to	in sum	to shed some light

Example (II)

S1: *Since* 2003, the country focused mainly on improving the educational system

S2: *Particularly*, assessment as institutional requirement is considered a crucial part to check the effectiveness of teaching-learning process

S3: *Hence*, at that time there was a focus on developing appropriate assessment methods such as formative and summative assessments

S4: *Although* in several cases the terms assessment, evaluation and tests are used interchangeably, they are technically different

6.3. List o discourse markers found in the conclusion

The results obtained from this section reveal the following discourse markers used by doctoral students. The most common ones are as follows:

Table.5. discourse markers found in the conclusion

to conclude	although	as conclusion	it can be concluded
as we arrive to the end	as a conclusion	equally important	in brief
to put it in a nutshell way	finally	thus	thence
Thereupon	as a result	therefore	so

Example (III)

S1: *To conclude*, assessment methods are ways to evaluate students' progress for the end goal of enhancing their learning quality

S2: *To conclude*, the current essay has made its point to serious issue that threat learners and their learning career

S3: *In summary*, the assessment process in the Algerian educational institutes is in need of attentive reconsideration

S4: *In a broad sense*, and *as a conclusion*, it seems of a crucial significance to state that it is the right time for educators and syllabus

The data analyzed reveal that discourse markers were used differently by the participants. They encounter no problems or

distortions using markers in appropriate ways. However, all the participants differ in using discourse markers: Some have opted for more markers than others.

The findings of the analysis of the 15 essays reveal that students use DMs as signalling devices, i.e., to initiate a topic in the essays are diverse. The results disclose that most of the EFL doctoral students have opted for DMs effectively. The total numbers of discourse markers in each introduction could be more than what has been identified. The second phase of the analysis was the identification of the function of discourse markers in the introduction phase. For instance, some discourse markers are used (i) to illustrate. For instance, one of the participants writes: mark inflation can transpire when academically weaker learners higher marks than good or excellent learners. (ii) Adding information. For example, one of the participants has written: Also, assessment of the students' production is a key component of any educational system. Participants show different kinds of performance with respect to the use of discourse markers.

The findings show that a concentration of the varieties of the discourse markers has been used by the participants in the body paragraphs. Participants have opted from approximately 64 DMs. Differently stated, they have overused them, while others have kept on using the same markers. They have, therefore, underused them. Through this section (body), participants are expected to provide a variety of definitions, present different views of the scholars on the topic under investigation, discuss, comment, compare and contrast, give examples, and delineations. For this purpose, participants felt compelled to opt for a variety of markers. The following are short excerpts taken from participants' essays. (1) *So*, they can improve their learning. (2) *Thus*, formative assessment takes place during ... (3) *Accordingly*, we can mention other four types. (4) *Basically*, some

teachers and students concentrate on the content. (5) **Therefore**, children will be discouraged to interact successfully in such environment. (6) **To illustrate**, instructors will neither be able to.... (7) **However**, Algerian classes are still functioning in a more traditional way.

The findings obtained from the analysis of the last part of the participants essays. i.e., conclusion, show that a less concentration over the use of discourse markers by the participants. Also, the discourse markers that have been identified tend to fit what participants are expected to do. Results show that DMs obtained are suitable for drawing conclusions. To illustrate, the following are excerpts from participants' conclusions. (1) To conclude with, the Algerian educational system needs to reform its traditional assessment. (2) As we arrive to the conclusion, the current essay has made its point to a serious issue that threat learners and their learning career. (3) As a conclusion, it seems for a crucial significance to state that it is the right time for educators and designers to reconsider the issue of assessment. (4) It can be concluded that both formative and summative assessment complete each other.

7. Conclusion

The current paper has presented the use of discourse markers in EFL doctoral students' essays. Results obtained show that discourse markers have been used by EFL doctoral students differently. That is, some discourse markers are used extensively by some of the participants. i.e., they overused them in their essays. On the other hand, other participants underused them. They applied them for two reasons: (i) to maintain cohesion and coherence, (ii) some participants learn DMs by heart so whenever they feel that it is necessary to move from one idea to another they rush into using discourse markers. The results also reveal that some participants have overlooked discourse markers altogether.

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Appendix

The Assessment Methods and Feedback in the Algerian Educationnel System

During the last years, Policy makers in Algeria have made a radical reform in the curriculum as well as the methods of teaching and evaluating students at different levels to promote the quality of education. The approaches that are currently being implemented are learner-centered instead of heavily relying on the instructor as the sole source of knowledge. This process of reform was to follow competency- based approach standards and principles which focuses both on the attainment of knowledge as well as values, skills, attitudes, critical thinking and understanding. Also, Assessment of the students' production is a key component of any educational system as it is considered a basic constituent of effective teaching and learning.

Assessment has always been a sensitive issue as it is a critical component in the teaching learning process. It is important as it is a guide through which instructors can evaluate whether or not the underlined objectives have been achieved through recognizing the gap between what was taught and what actually has been learned.

In my opinion, the assessment methods applied in the Algerian educational institutions are not in synergy with the current reform of the curriculum. Teachers suffer from a significant lack of both pre-service as well as in-service training programs and constant workshops in the context of implementing the competency based

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assessment policy as they are expected to prepare students for real life problems.

Moreover, I believe that teachers lack sufficient knowledge about the competency based assessment methods and alternative assessment approaches that are implemented in the Algerian educational settings, as they heavily rely on traditional ways of evaluation such as mixed-items, multiple choice questions and short answers instead of integrating more innovative up-to-date methods like the use of portfolio, essay type tasks, projects, rubrics, peer and self-assessment.